

Eastern Regional Mental Health Board, Inc.

The citizen's voice in mental health policy.

DSS BUDGET THE MISSION VS. THE MINIONS

Robert E. Davidson, Ph.D.

I am Dr. Robert Davidson, Executive Director of the Eastern Regional Mental Health Board. The Legislature created us 35 years ago to keep an eye on the then-new community mental health system, and we have grown into a major planning, evaluation, and advocacy unit within the mental health system. As such, we have learned about the other agencies that people with mental illnesses use.

The Department of Social Services is a very difficult place to be or to depend on. The Governor has not yet found a Commissioner willing to tackle it, despite a national search. It is famous for unreturned phone calls and lost paperwork, for sympathetic staff alternating with insulting staff members, and regulations so complex that each region has a single person assigned to master and explain them to clients and the public.

At the same time, thousands of people *depend* on DSS for their very existence and subsistence. DSS administers funds that people with disabilities or undiagnosed limitations rely on for rent, food, medical care, and medication. It is tempting to take out one's frustrations with DSS on its budget, but that only makes things worse. Staff caseloads are already too big to see or care about cases as people. Spending extra time to assure a better outcome for the client is punished because it affects "productivity."

Meanwhile, the good people in DSS, DMHAS, OPM, and elsewhere are working to make one program at a time more efficient. They collapsed SAGA and the misbegotten Charter Oak health plan into Medicaid. They are working on Sustinet. They are combining services and structure in creative ways, such as supportive housing and "Money Follows the Person," to get people out of nursing homes, hospitals, and homelessness. A great variety of non-profit agencies use DSS program funding to bypass the paralysis of DSS itself. Please give them the resources and the freedom to continue to do so. Especially at risk are the **Independent Living Centers**, which arrange services for people with either mental or physical disabilities with amazing dedication and creativity.

On behalf of the people of the 39 towns of eastern Connecticut who care about people with disabilities, especially mental illnesses, I urge you to leave the DSS budget as intact as possible until the Governor finds a set of heroes with the combination of mathematical and human skills that reforming DSS requires. The people in Connecticut who need the help of DSS programs to overcome their problems and return to the work force-- as well as those who have lost their ability to work, but *not their humanity*—need whatever DSS as it is can do for them, until it can do it better.

Thank you for your time and attention.

401 West Thames Street · Campbell Building, Unit 105 · Norwich, CT 06360

Phone (860) 886- 0030 · Fax (860) 886-4014

E-mail: rdavidson@ermhb.org